



Latvia

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2002](#)

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
March 31, 2003

Latvia is a parliamentary democracy. The Prime Minister, as chief executive, and the Cabinet are responsible for government operations. The President, as Head of State, is elected by the Parliament. The Parliament elected Vaira Vike-Freiberga to a 4-year term in June 1999. The October 1998 elections for the 100-seat Parliament and the national referendum to amend the Citizenship Law to meet European standards were free and fair. The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary; although there was some improvement in the quality of the judiciary, significant problems, including inefficiency and allegations of corruption, remained.

The security apparatus consists of the national police and other services--such as the Special Immigration Police and the Border Guards--who are subordinate to the Ministry of Interior, municipal police who are under local government control, the military Counterintelligence Service and a protective service which are under the Ministry of Defense, and the National Guard--an element of the national armed forces--which also assists in police activities. Civilian authorities generally maintained effective control of the security forces. The Constitution Protection Bureau is responsible for coordinating intelligence activities. Members of the security forces, including police and other Interior Ministry personnel, committed human rights abuses.

Privatization essentially is complete, although some large utility companies remained in state hands including the national electric company, railroads, and shipping. Two-thirds of employment and 60 percent of gross domestic product is now in the private sector. The country has a population of approximately 2.5 million. The currency remained stable and was traded freely; unemployment was 7.9 percent, and annual inflation was 3 percent.

The Government generally respected the human rights of its citizens and the large resident noncitizen community; however, there were problems in some areas. Members of the security forces, including the police and other Interior Ministry personnel, sometimes used excessive force and mistreated persons. In most instances, the Government took disciplinary measures against those responsible. Prison conditions remained poor. Lengthy pretrial detention was a problem. The inefficient judiciary did not always ensure the fair administration of justice. Violence against women was a problem, and women were discriminated against in the workplace. Child prostitution and abuse were problems. There were some reports of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity. Trafficking in women and girls for the purpose of prostitution was a problem. Reform of the country's political and economic structure led to an invitation in December to join the European Union (EU) in May 2004. Latvia was invited by the Community of Democracies' (CD) Convening Group to attend the November 2002 second CD Ministerial Meeting in Seoul, Republic of Korea, as a participant.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports of the arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life committed by the Government or its agents.

Fifteen members of the army's Special Operations Unit were convicted in May in connection with the hazing death of a conscript in 2001. The ringleader was sentenced to 3 years probation, and the other 14 soldiers received suspended sentences. In addition, the army's anti-hazing program was fully established.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The Constitution prohibits such practices; however, there were credible reports that members of the security forces used excessive force and mistreated persons.

The Government took action against those responsible for the abuse of prisoners. According to the National Human Rights Office (NHRO), which records and investigates allegations of abuse of prisoners, 32 prisoner complaints were received during the year, of which 9 were resolved, 1 was dismissed, and the remainder were pending resolution.

There were credible reports of police violence. In one case, two officers were accused of beating an individual who was subsequently hospitalized. The officers have been suspended pending resolution of the case. On another occasion, members of Parliament demanded a written report regarding the videotaped beating of a suspect by police. In this case, the victims chose not to file a complaint, and no charges were brought against the officers.

Prison conditions remained poor, although progress continued in renovating older facilities. The Central Prison Administration opened a newly renovated wing at the Riga Central Prison during the year. Overcrowding remained a problem, particularly in facilities that housed prisoners awaiting trial, which were at 110 percent of capacity. In 2001 the Government enacted "temporary regulations" designed to ease the conditions for those held in such detention facilities, including restrictions on the number of occupants per cell and the continuation of the physical rehabilitation of older prisons. Government figures indicated that regular prisons were filled to 85 percent of overall capacity. Despite efforts by the Central Prison Administration, inadequate sanitation facilities, a persistent shortage of medical care, and insufficient lighting and ventilation were common problems; all stemmed from a lack of resources. During the year, the NHRO received 51 complaints regarding treatment by guards in prisons and other places of detention; these complaints were forwarded to the appropriate government offices for action. The Government, as well as human rights groups, remained concerned regarding the high number of drug-resistant tuberculosis cases, and the Government received assistance from several foreign organizations to address this problem. Due in part to action by prison authorities, the number of such cases--including primary and acquired multi-drug resistant tuberculosis cases at Riga Central Prison Hospital--continued to decline. The overcrowding at Riga Prison Hospital eased during the year.

Efforts to improve the criminal code progressed; a draft of the new code was circulated prior to its scheduled submission to Parliament in early 2003. Lengthy pretrial detention of juveniles remained a problem; however, the number of such detainees decreased (see Section 1.d.). In 2001 the President visited the Brasas Detention Facility and publicly criticized the conditions in which the juveniles were incarcerated and the length of their pretrial confinement. Female prisoners were held separately from male prisoners, and juveniles were held separately from adults. Overall 43 percent of all prisoners in the country were awaiting trial at year's end (see Section 1.d.). Unlike convicted criminals, persons in pretrial detention were not allowed to work or go to school, had limited contact with outside NGOs or family, and suffered from considerably worse living conditions than prisoners in general. Pretrial detainees were held separately from convicted criminals.

The Government permitted independent human rights observers to visit prisons. Domestic groups, such as the Latvian Center for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies, closely monitored prison conditions during the year.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

The Constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention; however, at times the Government did not respect these prohibitions in practice. The law requires the Prosecutor's Office to make a formal decision whether to charge or release a detainee within 72 hours after arrest. Charges must be filed within 10 days of arrest. The courts have responsibility for issuing arrest warrants. Detainees have the right to have an attorney present at any time. These rights are subject to judicial review but only at the time of trial. According to credible reports, these rights were not always respected in practice, especially outside of Riga.

According to Ministry of Interior personnel, detainees awaiting trial spend an average of 2 years in prison, but in practice pretrial detention could last much longer. More than 43 percent of all inmates were in pretrial detention. On November 1, the Ministry of Justice implemented changes to the Criminal Procedures Code limiting pre-trial detention to no more than 18 months from the first filing of the case, and amendments limiting the detention period

for minors were also enacted. As a result of these changes, 91 persons were released from detention. The number of minors held at the Brasas facility dropped from 192 in 2001 to 58 by year's end.

The law prohibits forced exile, and there were no reports that the Government employed it.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary, and the Government generally respected this provision in practice; however, while training and increased compensation resulted in some improvements in the quality of the judiciary, significant problems, including inefficiency and allegations of corruption, remained. In December both the President and the Minister of Justice called for improvements in the qualifications of the judiciary. The Constitution provides for the right to a fair trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right.

The judicial structure is composed of district (city) courts, regional courts, which hear appeals from district courts, the Supreme Court, which is the highest appeals court, and the Constitutional Court. The Constitutional Court is a seven-judge panel that is authorized to hear cases regarding constitutional issues at the request of state institutions or individuals who believe that their constitutional rights were violated. For more serious criminal cases, two lay assessors join the professional judge on the bench at the district and regional levels.

Corruption in the judicial system was allegedly widespread. On December 3, the Justice Minister stated that the new Anti-corruption Bureau should investigate the actions of judges suspected of corruption. In November the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) issued a ruling in the long-running case of Aleksander Lavent, who had been convicted in August of offenses involving the collapse of his bank. The ECHR ruled that the Government violated Lavent's rights to liberty and security, that the courts had not been independent and impartial, and that Lavent had been denied the right to a fair hearing within a reasonable period of time. The Government was ordered to pay Lavent's court costs, but no punitive damages were imposed.

Most judges have inadequate judicial training, and the court system is too weak to enforce many of its decisions. A major difficulty in enforcing court decisions is the lack of an effective bailiff or sheriff system. The law allows for alternative punishments, including community service; however, the courts rarely used alternative punishments.

Lengthy pretrial detention was a problem (see Section 1.d.). During the year, the NHRO reviewed 143 cases regarding the right to a fair and timely trial. By year's end, a domestic human rights NGO recorded four complaints regarding the right to a fair and public trial within a reasonable time. An outdated and time-consuming judicial process, the lack of plea-bargaining, and a shortage of judges have so overloaded the courts that the average case takes 2 years to reach judicial review.

Court decisions were not published systematically, nor was there a centralized index for those that were published. Trials may be closed if state secrets might be revealed or to protect the interests of minors. All defendants have the right to hire an attorney, and the State lends funds to indigent defendants for this purpose. Defendants have the right to read all charges, confront all witnesses, and may call witnesses and offer evidence to support their case. They also may make multiple appeals.

There were no reports of political prisoners.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law prohibits such actions, and the Government generally respected these prohibitions in practice. The law requires that law enforcement authorities have a judicial warrant to intercept citizens' mail, telephone calls, or other forms of communication. The laws protecting privacy apply to citizens and noncitizens equally. There were no credible reports of the unsanctioned wiretapping of telephone conversations.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The Constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and the Government generally respected these rights in practice. The Press Law prohibits censorship of the press or other mass media; however, the Law on the Media contains a number of restrictive provisions regulating the content and language of broadcasts. At least 51 percent of television broadcasts must be of European origin, of which 40 percent should be in the Latvian language; however, these provisions were not always implemented. In addition, foreign investment may not

exceed 20 percent of the capital in electronic media organizations.

Both Latvian and Russian language newspapers published a wide range of political criticism and viewpoints. Most newspapers and magazines were owned privately. A large number of independent television and radio outlets broadcast in both Russian and Latvian, and the number of persons receiving satellite television broadcasts continued to increase.

The Government generally did not restrict access to the Internet.

The Government did not restrict academic freedom.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Constitution provides for freedom of assembly, and the authorities may not prohibit public gatherings; however, organizers of demonstrations must provide advance notice to local authorities, who may change the time and place of public gatherings for such reasons as fear of public disorder. The law also requires protesters to remain specified distances from foreign diplomatic missions, the Parliament, the Prosecutor's Office, and certain other public institutions. Independent human rights organizations argued that the law's provisions were contradictory and confusing. Nevertheless, numerous demonstrations took place peacefully and without government interference during the year.

The Constitution provides for freedom of association, and the Government generally respected these rights in practice; however, the Law on Registering Public Organizations bars the registration of Communist, Nazi, or other organizations whose activities would contravene the Constitution. Noncitizens may join and form political parties, but there must be at least 200 citizens in the party, and at least half of the total membership must be citizens (see Section 3). More than 40 political parties were registered officially.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, bureaucratic problems for minority religions persisted.

There is no state religion; however, the Government distinguishes between "traditional" (Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believers, Baptist, and Jewish) and "new" religions.

Although the Government does not require the registration of religious groups, the law accords religious organizations certain rights and privileges when they register, such as status as a separate legal entity for owning property or for other financial transactions, as well as tax benefits for donors. Registration also eases the rule for public gatherings.

According to Ministry of Justice officials, most registration applications are approved once proper documents are submitted; however, the law does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious union (church) in a single confession, and the Government has denied applications on this basis.

Visa regulations require that religious workers present either an ordination certificate or evidence of religious education that corresponds to a Latvian bachelor's degree in theology. The visa application process still is cumbersome; however, difficulties in this area diminished, and Citizenship and Migration Department officials worked to ease the situation. The Government cooperated to resolve several difficult visa cases in favor of missionary workers.

Foreign evangelists and missionaries are permitted to hold meetings and to proselytize, but the law stipulates that only domestic religious organizations may invite them to conduct such activities. Foreign religious denominations criticized this provision.

The law provides that religion may be taught to students in public schools on a voluntary basis only by representatives of the Evangelical Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believers, Baptist, and Jewish religions. The State provides funds for this education. Students at state-supported national minority schools also may receive education on the religion "characteristic of the national minority" on a voluntary basis. Other denominations may provide religious education in private schools only.

Property restitution has been substantially completed. An agreement between the Observant and non-Observant Jewish communities opened the way to settling the status of the properties remaining.

Relations between the various religious communities were generally amicable. Ecumenism remains a new concept in the country, and traditional religions have adopted a reserved attitude toward the concept. Although government officials encouraged a broader understanding of and acceptance of newer religions, suspicions remained regarding newer nontraditional faiths.

Ethnicity is only indicated in citizen passports at the bearer's request (see Section 5). Jews are considered an ethnic group and are listed as such, rather than as Latvian, Russian, or other.

For a more detailed discussion see the 2002 International Religious Freedom Report.

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The Constitution provides for these rights, and the Government generally respected them in practice.

The law stipulates that registered permanent resident noncitizens enjoy the right to establish and change residences, travel abroad, and return to the country; however, certain rights are denied to noncitizen residents (see Section 3). They are prohibited from working as armed guards or criminal trial attorneys. Noncitizens may own land only under complex procedures but may not purchase land in the border zones. The law also provides for the issuance of a noncitizen travel document that certifies these rights. The Government has readmitted noncitizens who claimed refugee status in a foreign country or who voluntarily abandoned their permanent residence and then decided to return to the country to live and work. Noncitizens who left the country as refugees during the Soviet era had no difficulty returning on foreign refugee travel documents for business reasons or for family visits. The Government also extends protections to noncitizen residents who travel abroad.

The law provides for the granting of refugee and asylum status in accordance with the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. The Government cooperated with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees. Special immigration police and border guard units help prescreen asylum requests. Decisions of the Citizens and Migration Affairs Office may be appealed to the Asylum Appeals Board in the Ministry of Justice. The issue of provision of first asylum did not arise during the year. According to statistics provided by the immigration police, 6,314 undocumented aliens were identified at the border; most were denied entry. A total of 254 illegal immigrants were apprehended (219 within the country and 35 at the border), of whom 132 departed voluntarily and the rest were deported. The Government has approached Russia and Belarus about concluding refugee readmission agreements, the lack of which posed a major barrier to effective control of the eastern border; however, no such agreements had been concluded by year's end.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The Constitution provides citizens with the right to change their government peacefully, and citizens exercised this right in practice through periodic, free, and fair elections held on the basis of universal suffrage. Free and fair elections for Parliament were held on October 5. Candidates from 6 of the 20 participating parties, representing a broad political spectrum, won seats in Parliament, and 72.5 percent of eligible voters participated. In June 1999, the Parliament elected the President.

The election law prohibits persons who remained active in the Communist Party or various other pro-Soviet organizations after January 1991, or who worked for such institutions as the former Soviet Committee for State Security, from seeking elected office. Noncitizens, most of whom are ethnic Russians, are not allowed to vote; however, many ethnic Russians are Latvian citizens and may vote (see Section 5). Noncitizens may join and form political parties, but there must be at least 200 citizens in the party, and at least half of the total membership must be citizens (see Section 2.b.).

In April the ECHR ruled that the Government had violated the rights of Ingrida Podkolzina, an ethnic Russian citizen, to free elections and awarded her \$7,500 (12,300 lats) for non-pecuniary damage and \$1,500 (2,460 lats) for legal costs and expenses. In 1998 the Central Election Commission denied Podkolzina the right to stand for election to Parliament on the grounds that she did not possess an adequate command of Latvian, despite the fact that she held a valid certificate attesting that she spoke Latvian fluently. The ECHR declined, however, to rule, on the validity of the basic law itself. In May the Parliament rescinded the Latvian language requirements of the local and parliamentary laws, which had required a higher level of Latvian language proficiency for voters than was

required for citizenship.

In October 18 women were elected to the 100-member Parliament, and a woman chaired the Parliament. There were two women in the 15-member Cabinet of Ministers. The President is a woman.

There are no ethnic restrictions on eligibility to hold political office. Nonethnic Latvians, including ethnic Russians and Poles, served in various elected bodies.

Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

A growing number of domestic and international human rights groups devoted to research and advocacy on human rights issues, including prison conditions and women's and children's rights, generally operated without government restriction. Several organizations dealt with issues of concern to local noncitizens and other nonethnic Latvians and presented such concerns to the courts and the press. The Government engaged in dialog with NGOs working on human rights issues and was generally responsive to their views. A number of NGOs provided assistance to those who wished to complain about police abuse or abuse in prisons (see Section 1.c.).

The NHRO is an independent governmental institution with a mandate to promote human rights, provide information on human rights, investigate individual complaints, and initiate its own investigations into alleged violations. The office acted as a general ombudsman on social issues and handled a variety of individual complaints, primarily concerning problems with receiving social benefits.

Section 5 Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Disability, Language, or Social Status

According to the Constitution, all citizens are equal under the law. Amendments to the Constitution passed by Parliament in 1998 provide for the protection from discrimination due to race, sex, language, or disability; however, discrimination against women in the workplace was a problem.

Women

Although no overall statistics were available, observers reported that domestic violence against women, often connected with alcohol abuse, was significant and underreported. Police did not compile figures for domestic violence as a distinct category. Instead, episodes were placed under more general categories such as assault or battery. During the year, 93 rape cases were reported. Women who were victims of abuse often were uninformed about their rights and were reluctant to seek redress through the justice system. Human rights groups asserted that the legal system, including the courts, tended to downplay the seriousness of domestic violence and that the police were reluctant at times to make arrests in such cases.

There are no shelters designed specifically for battered or abused women. There is one shelter in Riga where homeless women with children may reside for up to 2 months. There are no specific rape or assault hot lines; however, NGOs managed two crisis hot lines.

Prostitution was widespread and often was linked to organized crime. The Government estimated that 3,000 persons worked as prostitutes. Prostitution is legal; however, procuring is not, but the NHRO reported that adult prostitutes had no legal protections. There are no state institutions to assist prostitutes; however, the private Latvian Center for Gender Problems provided medical help and social support for prostitutes. Trafficking in women for prostitution was a problem (see Section 6.f.).

Sexual harassment of women in the workplace, although illegal, reportedly was common. Cultural factors tended to discourage women from coming forth publicly with complaints of abuse.

Women possessed the same legal rights as men. The Labor Code bans employment discrimination; however, in practice women frequently faced hiring and pay discrimination, especially in the emerging private sector. The Labor Code also prohibits women from performing "hard jobs or jobs having unhealthy conditions," which are specified in a list agreed upon by the Cabinet and labor unions. According to the Central Statistics Bureau, the number of women in the lower income brackets exceeded the number of men by 75 percent, while men outnumbered women 2 to 1 in upper income levels. The Ministry of Welfare established a 1-person office to deal with gender problems.

A new labor law prohibits work and pay discrimination based on gender and requires employers to set equal pay

for equal work. The law also defines workplace gender-based discrimination.

Women's advocacy groups--growing in size and number--were involved in finding employment for women, lobbying for increased social benefits, and assisting victims of domestic abuse.

Children

The law on the rights of the child and constitutional provisions on children provide for various protections, including health care and legal protections against physical abuse; however, these provisions were not enforced fully in practice. Schooling is mandatory through the 9th grade, between the ages of 7 and 16, and free through the 12th grade, or age 18. Despite the existence of laws on mandatory education, truancy was widespread and growing. There is a national Center for the Protection of the Rights of the Child. A few children's advocacy groups were active, particularly in lobbying for legislation to protect children's rights and for increased welfare payments for children.

Law enforcement authorities have won court suits to remove children from abusive parents and secured convictions in child molestation cases; however, evidence suggested that abandonment and child abuse, including sexual abuse, were relatively widespread, as was child prostitution. An estimated 12 to 15 percent of prostitutes were between the ages of 8 and 18. Although in theory the Constitution and the law protect children, these rights were enforced only sporadically in the case of child prostitutes. Trafficking in young girls for prostitution abroad increased (see Section 6.f.).

The Dardedze Center Against Abuse, opened in Riga in 2001, continued to provide support to abused children. The center offered multidisciplinary treatment and rehabilitation to victims of child abuse and their families. The center also has a forensic interview room where victims can be interviewed in a secure environment and their testimony directly transmitted to a courtroom.

Persons with Disabilities

The Constitution provides for the protection of persons with disabilities against discrimination; the law provides for their right of access to public facilities. Provisions in the Labor Law and other laws aim to protect persons with disabilities from bias in the workplace and from job discrimination. There is no governmental or societal bias against persons with disabilities. In 1998 the Cabinet adopted a framework document entitled "Equal Opportunity for Everyone," which was designed to coordinate the efforts of all branches of Government in assisting persons with disabilities; however, lack of funding has limited its effectiveness. The Government supported special schools for persons with disabilities.

The law requires buildings to be accessible to wheelchairs; however, the Government did not enforce the law uniformly and most buildings were not wheelchair accessible. However, some larger cities, including Riga and Ventspils, have undertaken an extensive wheelchair ramp building program at intersections.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Approximately 1 million residents are of non-Latvian ethnicity, including more than 700,000 ethnic Russians, 100,000 ethnic Belarussians, almost 64,000 ethnic Ukrainians, and more than 60,000 ethnic Poles. More than 74 percent of the country's inhabitants are citizens, including nearly 400,000 persons who belong to national or ethnic minorities. There are approximately 583,000 resident noncitizens, of whom an estimated 68 percent are Russian; 12 percent, Belarussian; 9 percent, Ukrainian; and smaller percentages of Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, Roma, Germans, Tatars, Estonians, and Armenians. Due to the Russification policy pursued during the Soviet era, ethnic Latvians constitute only 56 percent of the population, and 78 percent of citizens--and less than 40 percent of the population in three of the country's seven cities, including the capital city of Riga. The country's Romani community nearly was destroyed during the Holocaust. While the community received some support from the Government, high levels of unemployment and illiteracy were problems.

Effective this year, citizen passports no longer identify the ethnicity of the bearer. Should the bearer choose, ethnicity may be identified by an amendment on the second page (see Section 2.c.).

Following the restoration of independence in 1991, citizenship was accorded immediately only to those persons who were citizens of the independent Latvian Republic in 1940 and their direct descendants. After independence the status of approximately 670,000 persons, mostly ethnic Russians, changed from citizens of the Soviet Union to

noncitizen residents in Latvia. Since 1995 a total of 58,145 persons have become citizens: 23,000 were naturalized in 2000 and 2001, and an additional 9,000 were naturalized during the year. To facilitate the naturalization process, the Government reduced significantly the naturalization fee and accepted high school level language certificates as sufficient for naturalization purposes. To increase the rate of naturalization, in 2001 the Latvian Naturalization Board implemented an advertising campaign in cooperation with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the U.N. Development Program, and other international donors.

The Citizenship Law includes a Latvian language and residence requirement for those seeking to naturalize, as well as restrictions on the naturalization of former Soviet intelligence and military personnel. The law also requires applicants for citizenship to renounce previous non-Latvian citizenship, to have knowledge of the Constitution and Latvian history, and to pledge allegiance to the country. According to Naturalization Board figures, nearly 95 percent of applicants passed the citizenship tests on the first attempt. Children of noncitizens born after August 1992 are entitled to citizenship upon application. International observers, including the resident OSCE mission, credited the Government with establishing a competent and professional Naturalization Board with offices throughout the country to implement the law and generally applying the law fairly. However, international experts, government officials, and domestic human rights monitors agreed that the country must continue to place high priority on and devote sufficient resources to implementing the citizenship law in a fair and impartial manner, as well as seek ways to expedite naturalization and promote social integration.

The Language Law regulates the uses of language that affect public safety, health care, protection of the consumer, and labor rights and requires that documents submitted to the Government be translated into Latvian, except in cases of emergency, including company reports and records. In a public event co-organized by the State, one of the working languages must be Latvian. Labels and user instructions for goods sold must be in Latvian, although other languages may be present as well. However, the implementation of this law remained a matter of public debate and continued international attention.

The Government financially supported education in both Latvian and Russian, as well as in eight other minority languages. However, under the revised Education Law, the Government continued to implement a bilingual education program at the elementary school level, with the goal of facilitating the transition to Latvian-language secondary schools by 2004. Although all non-Latvian-speaking students in public schools were supposed to learn Latvian and to study a minimum number of subjects in Latvian, there was a shortage of qualified teachers. State-funded university education is in Latvian, and incoming students whose native language is not Latvian must pass a language entrance examination. However, several private institutions offered higher education in Russian.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law stipulates that workers, except for the uniformed military, have the right to form and join labor unions of their own choosing; however, the Government's ability to protect the right to organize in the private sector was weak. Union membership was approximately 240,000 out of a workforce of 800,000. Free elections for union leadership are held every 4 years.

Unions are free to affiliate in confederations, and there was one such confederation in the country. Unions also are free to affiliate internationally and have established contacts with European labor unions and international labor union organizations.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

Labor unions have the right to bargain collectively and are generally free of government interference in their negotiations with employers. Collective bargaining agreements were common and were negotiated by industry or company. The law prohibits discrimination against union members and organizers. While not widespread, discrimination occurred within individual companies.

The law does not limit the right to strike, but there were no major strikes during the year. The law bans the dismissal of employees who have invoked the right to strike. No cases of such dismissals were reported.

There were no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Bonded Labor

The law prohibits forced or bonded labor, including by children, and there were no reports that such practices occurred. Inspectors from the Ministry of Welfare's State Labor Inspection Board or Inspectorate were responsible for enforcing the law.

d. Status of Child Labor Practices and Minimum Age for Employment

The statutory minimum age for employment of children is 15 years, although children between the ages of 13 and 15 years may work in certain jobs outside of school hours. The law restricts employment of those under the age of 18; for example, by banning night shift or overtime work. Enforcement of child labor laws was lax.

The Government has not ratified ILO Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labor.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The monthly legally mandated minimum wage was approximately \$98 (60 lats), far below the amount that trade union officials described as the bare minimum necessary for survival; it did not provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family. The actual average monthly minimum wage (the calculation of which includes wages of part-time employees and agricultural workers) was \$286 (176 lats).

The Labor Code provides for a mandatory 40-hour maximum workweek with at least one 42-hour rest period weekly, 4 weeks of annual vacation, and a program of assistance to working mothers with small children. The laws establish minimum occupational health and safety standards for the workplace; however, these standards frequently are ignored. Workers have the legal right to remove themselves from hazardous work situations without endangering their continued employment; however, these standards also frequently were ignored in practice.

f. Trafficking in Persons

There is no law that specifically prohibits all forms of trafficking, although a 2000 Criminal Code revision makes it illegal forcibly to send a person to a foreign country for the purpose of sexual exploitation. On December 11, the Government signed the U.N. Protocols to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons and Against the Smuggling of Migrants. Trafficking in women for the purpose of prostitution was a problem (see Section 5).

During the year, there were 14 cases of trafficking, of which 6 were referred to the courts for prosecution and 8 remained under investigation at year's end.

Over the last 2 years, the Government allocated more resources towards combating trafficking in persons. There is a high-level working group on trafficking, and the Ministry of Interior, which includes the State Police and the Citizenship and Migration Department, is the principal government ministry involved in the trafficking problem. Also participating in the working group are representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Welfare, and the National Center for the Protection of the Rights of the Child. The Government has allocated funds to increase the number of police officers tasked with fighting prostitution and trafficking. However, NGOs were concerned that the Government had not developed a strategy for focusing on the problem.

Latvia was primarily a country of origin and transit for trafficked victims rather than a destination, although no exact statistics were available. The main countries of destination were Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, Spain, Greece, Italy, the United Kingdom, and to a lesser extent Cyprus and Israel. Statistics released by European police services indicated that the number of Latvian women involved as victims of trafficking increased. In 2001 a total of 186 women (not all necessarily involved in trafficking) were deported back to the country. According to authorities in Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, and Denmark, Latvian women made up a disproportionately high number of the women engaged in prostitution in those countries as well as a high number of trafficked women in those countries. There were undocumented reports that trafficking in women (including minors) for prostitution abroad increased (see Section 5).

Traffickers, primarily organized criminal groups, usually lured victims through offers of false employment in European countries. A large number of victims were drawn from the economically depressed areas of eastern Latvia. Other victims were recruited through job advertisements, modeling agencies, travel agencies, and nightclubs.

There are virtually no trafficking victims assistance programs in the country. Upon returning to the country, victims of trafficking were not singled out for governmental or societal abuse or mistreatment, and they can return home.

Genders was the primary NGO involved in working with prostitutes, and two NGOs have begun operations to educate adolescents regarding trafficking issues. Throughout the year, several NGOs, particularly the International Organization for Migration (IOM) sponsored several conferences on Trafficking. In addition, IOM sponsored an aggressive advertising campaign warning of the dangers of accepting attractive employment offers from abroad. The posters were prominently displayed in bus stops and other public venues.